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11. LANGUAGE EDUCATION – TOWARDS TRANSVERSAL INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on describing the issues considered to form the basis for the current quality of foreign language teaching in basic education in Finland. This basis has its cornerstones in research-based teacher education and active networking between the different stakeholders in the field. We introduce the main aims and core contents of language education as well as the latest trends in pedagogical approaches, methods and the role of assessment. We present descriptions of projects and networks set up to support the application of both the latest results of research on language education and the implementation of the national core curriculum at the local school level. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the challenges for future quality work in the field of language education in Finnish comprehensive schools. It is not enough only to maintain the current quality level; there needs to be an upgrading of quality.

Keywords: Language education, language proficiency, foreign language teaching and learning, language teacher, basic education, curriculum reform

THE CORNERSTONES OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Introduction to the Current Situation

The number of people who speak the Finnish national languages, Finnish and Swedish, is very modest compared to, e.g., bigger European nations and their languages. Finnish people as a nation need proficiency in a range of languages to be able to communicate and cooperate with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds both for business and pleasure. Even Swedish is in practice a foreign language in most of the country, because the Swedish-speaking minority (ca. 5%) is heavily concentrated on the western coast and in southern Finland. Owing to this background, it is easy to understand that we are, and we have to be, committed to investing in language education in Finland. Foreign languages and the need for foreign language proficiency and intercultural communication skills have become, in one way or another, part of every Finn's everyday life – both in interpersonal

situations and through extended use of traditional and social media. For example, as a rule TV programmes in Finland are not dubbed, which gives us the benefit of everyday exposure to foreign languages while watching the television.

Since the 1970s, language proficiency, communicative competence, intercultural communication competence, multilingualism, and multiculturalism have become a joint European concern. For example, the Council of Europe is concerned to improve the quality of communication among the Europeans of different language and cultural backgrounds (CEFR, 2001, xi, 3–6). In Finland, different stakeholders of language education have actively participated in developing the field of language learning and teaching at the European level (e.g. use of the CEFR and ELP). Simultaneously with internationalization and globalization, the concept of language proficiency and the objectives of language education have been profoundly modified. Currently, language learning is seen as an individual, lifelong, in and out of school effort, which is to be encouraged and supported at all levels of education (CEFR, 2001).

Since the 1970s when the 9-year comprehensive-type basic school system was launched in Finland, the right and obligation to study foreign languages have concerned everybody from the very beginning of the school path. Currently, language studies (minimally comprising of a mother tongue, one of the two national languages, and at least one foreign language) are compulsory at each level of the Finnish school system. Foreign language studies are to start in basic education at the latest in the 3rd grade at the age of 9. The most often offered and studied first foreign language is English. In 2012, 90.5% of the 3rd graders, the age group being almost 58 000 children, started English as their first compulsory foreign language, while 5.3% started Finnish and 1% Swedish. The proportion of pupils who began with German (1.2%) or French (0.9%) was about 1% in each language, while Russian (0.3%) and other languages attracted even fewer pupils (Kumpulainen, 2014).

The compulsory minimum of languages to be studied in comprehensive school is three languages: a mother tongue from the 1st grade on, the first foreign language at the latest from the 3rd grade on and another national language, which for most of the (Finnish-speaking) pupils is Swedish, at the latest from the 7th grade on. From the autumn of 2016, the second national language will be started one year earlier, in the 6th grade (Valtioneuvoston asetus 422/2012). In addition, there is an opportunity to choose an optional language from the 5th and/or 8th grade on, even though this option is not always available in all municipalities due to practical and economic reasons. All in all, in addition to Finnish and Swedish, pupils have an opportunity to study a maximum of three foreign languages in basic education. However, the proportion of pupils who make full use of this opportunity has been declining during the last few years. In 2012, foreign language studies were started before the 3rd grade by not more than 6.9% of 1st graders and 12.5% of 2nd graders. In 2012, approximately every fourth (26.6%) 5th grader studied two foreign languages of advanced syllabus (A languages) and less than one fifth (17.2%) of 8/9 graders had studied an optional language according to a short syllabus (B language) starting from the 8th grade at the age of 14 (see e.g. Kumpulainen, 2014). The most common

set of languages studied by comprehensive school pupils is Finnish, Swedish and English.

Referring to the title of this paper, foreign language teaching is, not only in Finland but internationally as well, in the process of a paradigm shift towards foreign language education (focusing on education) that integrates experiential, sociocultural and ecological theories of learning (see e.g., Kohonen, 2009). Language education emphasizes meaningful learning that is based on personal experience, social interaction and reflection. It aims at all-around human growth. This kind of approach inevitably poses new challenges for teachers' professional competencies and teacher education to enable a new kind of interactive and collaborative learning culture in schools (Kohonen, 2009, 16–26). In addition to linguistic communication, the latest curriculum reform of basic education in Finland (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014) recognizes the need for language education that is wider in perspective than mere linguistic skills. This view intertwines linguistic skills with a larger framework of multilingualism and multiliteracy, emphasising individual's functional language proficiency in everyday situations and cultural encounters.

RESEARCH-BASED TEACHER EDUCATION AND FL TEACHING

A Brief History of Foreign Language Teaching in Finland

In the following, we will give a brief overview of the focal contents and highlights of language education as stated in the normative documents through the decades of general compulsory education. We will also describe how the core curricula were implemented across the local settings over time by prioritizing whatever methodical options were popular at the time for teaching and learning foreign languages and assessing the learning outcomes.

Before the onset of comprehensive education, compulsory and equal for all citizens, the educational system of Finland was characterized by parallel paths, strongly diversified in nature in terms of the future qualifications they provided to the students. Prior to 1970, only the students attending a form of schooling targeted to more academic professions (lower and upper secondary schools) were provided opportunities to study foreign languages. The methodology was largely borrowed from the studies of classic languages favouring grammar, translation and the written mode, in the teaching of even modern languages. Although the superiority of form over function is something of an unresolved issue still today, the ethos of language teaching and learning has undergone a profound change since those days. Since the mid-1970s, the language syllabi launched for the comprehensive school were inspired by the notional-functional models proposed to promote European mobility. Until the 1980s, these language syllabi also presented detailed lists of structures and situations intended to be followed by teachers. Such lists may be viewed as a top-down power distribution, downplaying teacher autonomy and continuing the

behaviourist tradition of teaching and learning. However, the way for communicative competence as a goal for foreign language teaching and learning was paved for further elaboration. The communicative turn was manifested in new teaching materials including texts striving to convey everyday language use and promote speaking skills. The role of oral language proficiency grew in importance during the 1980s and 1990s along with an increased concern for autonomy issues, in regard to both teachers and students. Local curricula were derived from the national core content allowing teachers to find their own methodological priorities that fit local settings of learning. More attention was paid to pupils' diversity and differing needs. Humanistic conceptions of learning eased the atmosphere of school learning and merged with the constructivist mainstream that first materialized in the 1994 core curriculum (POPS, 1994).

This core curriculum only stated the broad frame for teaching and learning and allowed teachers a large amount of freedom of local interpretation and pedagogical choice. At the national level, both positive and negative consequences of the curricular freedom expressed in 1994 were detected. In some municipalities, the local curricula were of high quality and schools had profited themselves to reflect and consolidate local collaboration, but a great variation was discovered. Furthermore, teachers wanted more normative guidance for their work.

The cycle of curricular design at the dawn of the millennium (2004) sought to respond to a number of international, societal and pedagogical challenges. The need for removing obstacles to international mobility between countries was well noted in Finland, and Finnish language experts actively participated in and benefited from the Council of Europe activities. These long-term enterprises culminated in publishing effective tools for making language education more systematic, comprehensive and transparent. The Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR, 2001) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) along with the national versions (EVK, 2003; Kohonen, 2005) are among the most prominent and incorporated the yield of several decades of development work within the Council of Europe modern language project. The major reform in the 2004 core curricula was probably the adaptation of the CEFR proficiency level system (A1–C2) to illustrate progress of language ability in different syllabuses (Hildén & Takala, 2007).

Main Aims Set in the Language Core Curricula

Language education in Finnish comprehensive schools is based on the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, the latest being from the years 1994, 2004, 2014. The latest National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014) is a normative guideline for teaching and educational work specifying the education providers, local municipalities and schools not only the objectives and main content for various subjects, but also a wider framework and guidelines for organising basic education, e.g. the basic values to be followed,

working culture, and its development (See Finnish National Board of Education, 2014).

The process of curriculum reform (see Finnish National Board of Education, 2014; Halinen, 2015) relies heavily on the latest academic research. Expert groups of teachers, teacher educators and researchers participated in drafting the structure and content for the new curriculum. As regards language education, the National Board of Education also invested in carrying out a sample-based evaluation of the outcomes of the most studied foreign languages at the end of basic education in 2013 (see Finnish Education Evaluation Centre & Finnish National Board of Education, 2015). Results of the evaluation provided information on the key development objectives in language education and helped in formulating the guidelines for language education in the new curriculum. Additionally, parallel to the curriculum reform process, the National Board of Education has published research-based article collections for the benefit of language education providers and teachers at the local level. Well-established experts in the field, as well as scholars and practitioners of younger generations, were invited to share their experiences by writing articles to support the pedagogical and didactical processes for implementing the spirit and ideas of the new curriculum in practice (see e.g. Hildén & Härmälä, 2015; Mustaparta, 2015). These resources are all publicly available on the Internet.

Also, a principle of openness was applied in that drafts of the core curriculum were publicly available on a specific website for commenting during the curriculum reform process. A broad range of stakeholders was consulted for the preparation of the earlier curricular cycles as well, but the latest curriculum reform process was more open than ever. Concerning language education, the major agents involved have been teacher associations, researchers, employer associations and diverse cultural groups. On this round, any individual person – parent, pupil or anyone interested – also had an opportunity to influence the process (OPS, 2016).

In foreign language education, a language has been seen not only as a skill subject and means of communication but also as a cultural subject. The latest curriculum reform process shows a commitment to developing language education. For the first time, the concept of language education (in Finnish “kielikasvatus”), is included in the syllabi of all languages, mother tongue included (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014). In addition, language education is embedded in all education signaling that language education at the practical level in basic education requires cooperation between different subjects. This, of course, means cooperation between teachers of different subjects. In other words, regardless of his or her subject, each teacher is also a language teacher of said subject. In the spirit of the new curriculum (e.g. Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, pp. 28, 325, 348) language is seen as a prerequisite for all learning and thinking. As a curiosity, the latest National Core Curriculum for Basic Education also explicitly states that in language learning, there is room for joy, playfulness and creativity in all grades (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, pp. 197, 348).

In the light of the latest core curriculum, pluri-/multilingualism and pluri-/multiculturalism, language awareness and cultural diversity penetrate the whole basic education. Starting from the basic values of the core curriculum, linguistic and cultural diversity are seen as richness (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, 16). The background for all this stems from the European policies and cooperation implemented by European institutional bodies (see e.g. CEFR, 2001; ECML). The latest National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 18), to be implemented starting from August 2016, aims at developing schools as learning communities, emphasizes the joy of learning and collaborative atmosphere, as well as promoting student autonomy in studying and in school life. Basic education forms the cornerstone for the whole educational system and is simultaneously a part of the lifelong education path starting from the preprimary education.

The latest core curriculum emphasizes transversal competencies, i.e., an entity comprising of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and motivation, and the ability to put them to use appropriately in a situation (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). The learning goals of transversal competencies are described as seven competence areas (L1–L7) encompassing Thinking and learning to learn (L1), Cultural competence, interaction and self-expression (L2), Taking care of oneself and others, managing daily life (L3), Multiliteracy (L4), Competence in information and communication technology (L5), Working life competence and entrepreneurship (L6), and Participation, involvement and building a sustainable future (L7). As regards language education, cultural competence and multiliteracy are the learning goals most obviously addressed in the core content, although all the other goals are integrated in the process of language teaching and studying, too. This is a new way of incorporating competence-based and subject-based teaching and learning (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014).

A novel emphasis set on collaborative classroom practices will also be brought about in multi-disciplinary, phenomenon- and project-based studies where several teachers may work with any given number of students simultaneously. Language teachers are consequently invited to establish ongoing cooperation not only in their own circle, but across disciplines and even more broadly with colleagues abroad. The cornerstones for lifelong language learning are laid in the basic education where the repertoire of objectives covers not only linguistic competencies but also strategic competencies, both communication and learning strategies, and cultural skills as well. Objectives and core contents of foreign languages are presented separately for grades 1–2, grades 3–6 and grades 7–9. The aims and core contents for grades 3–6 and 7–9 are more specific than for grades 1–2. The core curricula also stress the fundamental alignment between objectives, learning process and assessment.

The goals of language teaching at each stage of grades encompass five main components: Growth towards cultural diversity and linguistic awareness, language study skills, developing/in-progress interactive language proficiency, developing/

in-progress receptive language proficiency, and developing/in-progress productive language proficiency. These are complemented with goals of transversal competencies and pedagogical instructions regarding teaching and assessment practices. As for interactive, receptive and productive language proficiency, the objectives of language teaching entail encouraging pupils to actively participate in discussions, providing them rich linguistic input of a variety of texts, and guiding them in producing spoken and written texts for meaningful purposes (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 349).

Approaches and Methods in Finnish Language Classrooms

By tradition, the Finnish core curricula express norms concerning aims, focal content and guidelines of assessment (in terms of objects and reporting), but no straightforward rules are given on how to implement these regulations. The pedagogical freedom left to teachers is therefore exceptional compared to the situation in many other countries. Today, the fundamental aim is that children (or any language learner/user) from the very beginning of their lifelong FL learning path have motivation, skills and confidence in facing all new language experiences in school and out of school to develop their linguistic repertory (For more specific points, see CEFR, 2001, pp. 1–5; EVK, 2003, pp. 19–25). If foreign language teaching is started in grades 1–2, it is to be functional and playful in nature, implying e.g. physical activities, games, songs and nursery rhymes. The emphasis is (to be) on listening, understanding and speaking skills whereas writing is introduced gradually and used to support oral practice. The core contents are related to the pupils' everyday lives, i.e. home and school. Also, pupils are introduced to the cultures and regions where the target language is used (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014).

Regarding pedagogical principles and practices, a number of approaches from various methodological origins merge in language classrooms. Communicative language teaching with modifications is the most common approach, mixed with traditional form-focused study of grammar. The need for form-focused study of grammar seems to be reinforced by the written matriculation examination at the end of upper secondary school. More recent foci are learner autonomy, oral proficiency, study of culture and socio-culturally oriented learning environments supported by ICT and most recently, by social media. The overall tendency of development during recent years has shifted from studying the (structure of) language towards studying the use of languages for real life purposes. There has been a shift from written to oral language, from grammar to language proficiency for real life needs, from translation to the communicative use of language, from teacher-centeredness to learner autonomy, from linguistic skills to intercultural communication competence and cultural sensitivity promoted by authentic intercultural encounters (e.g. Kohonen, Jaatinen, Kaikkonen, & Lehtovaara, 2001; EVK, 2003; Takala, 2009; Kohonen, 2009). In the 2010s, the immense progress of technologic facilities, parallel

environments supported by them and applications of artificial intelligence provide unforeseen prospects and opportunities of trying out multimedia and communicative resources including language ability. Language learners can become members of multiple virtual communities, acquire knowledge and enact their motivations and skills far beyond regular curricular studies. This option is legitimised in the latest curriculum documents (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, 354).

Because of the freedom of choice concerning teaching and learning techniques, no standardized templates for language lessons are advisable. There are, however, a set of broadly agreed upon basic guidelines for structuring a language lesson that are introduced to student teachers as a preliminary blueprint to start their work in a language classroom. They are drawn on several sources: e.g. principles of activity theory (Engeström, 1982) and cognitive theories of language learning (Kristiansen, 1998), sociocultural theories (Vygotsky, 1982; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), and most recently on ecological theories of learning (van Lier, 2009) and a holistic understanding of language acquisition as multi-sited and multimodal process leading to greater capacity and empowerment of individuals (Ortega, 2009). Disregarding the recognized aims at a high conceptual level, the current set of beliefs about effective classroom teaching seems to boil down to varieties of task-based language teaching and learning, more specifically to a weak version called task-supported language teaching (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998; van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009). In this version a piece of meaningful real-life activity is modified to serve language learning by choosing chains of actions that incorporate language elements (asking student to explain how they bake a cake instead of simply baking it in silence). Subsequently, the linguistic data naturally present in the situation is analysed by steering the students' attention to relevant forms and their use (focus on form) (Willis, 1996). The forms may also be practiced in additional contexts.

It is considered important to make a distinction between a task and an exercise in language teaching and learning. Tasks aim at using language for meaningful open-ended human communication with a genuine focus on the function and content of the message rather than on its form, and they provide opportunities for interaction, problem-solving and pedagogical intervention by the teacher and even enable scaffolding from peers. Exercises, on the other hand, rely heavily on a demand for formal accuracy and expected one-to-one responses. It goes without saying that tasks are the mode of work favoured in language teacher education and among leading language-teaching professionals (Hildén, 2009). A task is, by definition, a set of differentiated, sequenceable, problem-posing activities that involve learners and teachers jointly selecting from a range of varied cognitive and communicative procedures to be applied to existing and new knowledge in collective exploration (modified from Candlin, 2009, pp. 27–29). The key features of a task and student centred implementation is strongly voiced in mainstream Finnish language teacher education. The implementation of task-supported instruction is customarily cyclic

(Willis, 1996; Willis & Willis, 2009) starting from planning and proceeding through execution to feedback that foster new insight and launch a new cycle.

First, linguistic content is usually introduced to the pupils by referring to e.g. the usefulness of the functions or vocabulary in real-life situations, pupils' previous experiences of related situations to motivate the pupils to learn the intended structure or vocabulary. In the following phase, pupils typically listen to a text or watch a video clip for input. They are provided opportunities to seek clarification from peers and the teacher to make sure that they understand what is being taught. Pupils are instructed in pronunciation and intonation patterns and generally asked to read aloud the text in pairs or individually. This done, the pupils discuss the content of the text guided by question prompts or pictorial cues like mind-maps. They help each other on the way and provide feedback to their peers. Oral training tends to be prioritized in the classroom, whereas written tasks are commonly assigned as homework. Even grammar is treated in the same way proceeding from oral practice to written production. Creative use of the content in focus is encouraged from the very beginning resulting in improvised pair discussions, small-scale dramas and ad hoc narratives based on the vocabulary presented in the textbook or other channels of linguistic input. The third main phase of the pedagogical process consists of putting the linguistic content into proper use in a novel context relevant to the language-learning pupil. Most instances of such "externalization" are homework assignments to write a story using the vocabulary or the grammatical item in focus or oral homework, for instance, recording a video-clip dealing with the thematic content of the previous classes. These items of work are presented in the next lesson to peers and the teacher, not exclusively in all-class but preferably in small groups to be commented on by peers.

In accordance with the socio-cultural views on language teaching and learning, the task is rather seen as a work plan or a blueprint than a stand-alone and ready-made entity (Breen, 2009). This view is mirrored in the outcomes section by acknowledging various interpretations of the task script and allowing and encouraging student initiative at any stage of the task cycle. Students are also given opportunities to choose settings and actions, and the borderline between in-school and out-of-school learning is blurred by modern technologies and access to multicultural encounters in domestic environments. Also, the distinction between learning and acquisition has decreased for the same reasons, and language studies at school can incorporate uses of the language in spare time. In practice, though, the ideal of global learning and flexible alignment of students' everyday life at school and outside has not materialised quite as desired by teacher educators. For some reason, language teachers have not felt too confident with incorporating the options offered by information and communication technologies into their teaching (Pöyhönen & Luukka, 2007). According to even more recent research findings, Finnish language classes portray themselves in a relatively traditional fashion: written production

and textbook exercises are highly favoured at the cost of modern technologies and authentic materials and encounters. Speaking in pairs, on the other hand, has fought its way through as a mainstream practice of communicative language use in class (Härmälä, Huhtanen, & Puukko, 2014; Hildén & Rautopuro, 2014a).

Assessment of Learning Outcomes

According to the Basic Education Act (628/1998), pupil assessment in basic comprehensive education primarily aims at guiding studying and, consequently, promoting learning and pupils' self-assessment skills. The starting point for all assessment is the objectives of the curriculum that include subject specific progress, working and learning skills, and behaviour. It is important to note the distinction between the purposes of assessment which are the starting points for relevant assessment procedures and the arguments that can be presented concerning the validity of the assessment outcomes. In basic education curricula (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014), two types of assessment are acknowledged: assessment during the course of studies, and assessment at the end of courses, school years, and finally at the end of the entire basic education.

The modes of assessment and the quality requirements of assessment vary accordingly. For formative purposes during the course of education, criterion-referenced measures supported by on-going feedback and verbal records may be most appropriate, perhaps even as the only techniques applied in grades 1–7. From these grades onwards at the latest, pupils are to be given numerical grades, which however are not the only way of giving feedback on pupil progress. It is noteworthy that the grades are always assigned on the basis of the objectives in the curriculum, not by normative grounds of comparing pupils of a single class to each other. The grade must be based on varied sources of information; in a language subject this implies that both written and oral language performance should be considered. In addition, the grade in a foreign language includes the effort put into the studies as well as related strategic and cultural skills. Tools for enhancing pupils' self-assessment and peer-assessment as well (e.g. the European Language Portfolio, ELP) offer an excellent, but yet rarely implemented option to widen the view on the multifaceted assessment of language proficiency.

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 also sets particular emphasis on formative assessment and its major function as a part of the learning process. Formative assessment is closely intertwined with the development of self-regulation skills and pupils' capacity to gradually assume responsibility for their own actions to promote learning. This aim is consistently supported by providing teaching materials such as the electronic version of the European Language Portfolio, which, however, is not implemented as widely as intended (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre & Finnish National Board of Education, 2015; Härmälä, Huhtanen, & Puukko, 2014; Hildén & Rautopuro, 2014a). The Finnish versions of the European language portfolio, ELP, have been developed in a national project funded by the National

Board of Education. Three different ELP versions (for grades 1–3, 4–6, and 7–9), background information about the Finnish versions of ELP (in Finnish, Swedish and English), as well as supporting materials for teachers are publicly available on the Internet (see Eurooppalainen kielisalkku, 2015).

Towards the end of the basic level of education, the demand for comparability of grades across the country becomes stronger, because the grades provide a selection ground for further studies at the secondary level. To ensure equity and national comparability, two junction points (at the end of the 6th grade and the 9th grade) are singled out and the criteria of a “good” performance (grade 8 on a 4–10 scale) are provided. The description of good performance is meant to equalize teacher assessments across schools and regions. Research indicates, however, that a single description does not suffice to ensure a nation-wide correspondence between final school grades. Instead, there are significant differences between school grades assigned by different teachers and schools, and the evidenced mastery of subject content (Hildén & Rautopuro, 2014b; Hildén & Rautopuro, 2014c).

The materials used for assessment can be designed by teachers themselves or, even more commonly, are tests that teachers are free to modify for their local needs (such as testing materials published by textbook writers in conjunction with their books, or tests produced annually by teacher associations in their respective languages). In Finland, the pedagogical freedom of a language teacher broadly covers the choice of assessment tools. Only on the occasion of national assessment of learning outcomes, and for science, reading in L1 and mathematics under the OECD PISA-framework, are the sampled schools and teachers obliged to administrate an external test, written by a team of independent experts. The reports of these national assessment surveys are published by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre and available on their website (FINEEC). The national evaluations are implemented approximately once in ten years for foreign languages, and as in all subjects, the results are used entirely for informative and pedagogical purposes and treated with a great level of confidence in regard to schools and individual pupils and teachers. Administrators at municipal and school levels receive the scores of their own sample in relation to the nation-wide scores to enable conclusions and adequate measures to be taken locally. At the national level, the forthcoming results of the evaluations carried out in 2013 were considered in preparing and designing of the latest language curricula.

According to the 2013 evaluation, the objectives of language education were generally attained well or even excellently. In English language, pupils’ achievement turned out to be the most favourable: the majority of ninth grades exceeding the levels of good mastery with one or two level steps. The picture of the second national language, Swedish, was also a positive one, while the outcomes in other languages varied by skill and syllabus. On average, pupils in Swedish speaking schools achieved higher than those in schools with Finnish language of instruction; girls tended to outperform boys; and children of more highly educated parents succeeded better than their age-mates (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre & Finnish National Board of Education, 2015).

LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

As mentioned earlier, the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004) allows a lot of pedagogical freedom to individual language teachers and teacher teams to apply and elaborate the national goals for local circumstances. They are, in fact, required to do so when writing the local school-related curricula drawing on the national core documents. The same continues with the latest core curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). Finnish language teachers are educated to cope with the task to translate the statements of the normative documents into everyday work to promote students' learning. In the course of this work, the interaction of theory and practice introduced during the pre-service teacher education is revisited and supported by professional networks. A foreign language teacher's career from graduation to retirement spans an average of 40 years – so the in-service training and development projects are valuable to support the teachers to maintain and develop their professional competence and practices.

According to the Basic Education Decree (852/1998), children in grades 1–6 are taught primarily by class teachers and in grades 7–9 by subject teachers. In spite of this, the national Federation of Foreign Language Teachers in Finland (SUKOL), has recommended since the end of the 1990s that foreign languages should be taught by subject teachers in grades 1–6, too. This recommendation has been actively repeated because of the fact that according to the latest Government Decree on the General National Objectives and Distribution of Lesson Hours in Basic Education (Valtioneuvoston asetus 422/2012), starting from August 2016, studies of the second national language (most often Swedish) will be started in the 6th grade instead of 7th grade. According to our understanding, the teachers with double qualification, class teacher qualification and subject teacher qualification demanded for teaching FL in grades 7–9, might in principle have the most suitable professional competence for teaching languages in primary education (grades 1–6). With this kind of professional education, they both have the needed proficiency in the foreign language they teach (at least 60 ECTS of university studies) and know how to teach young learners.

In Finland, both the class teacher's and subject teacher's qualifications are based on a Master's degree (300 ECTS). While class teachers are professionals in teaching young learners in general, they do not necessarily have enough knowledge and skills in any foreign language themselves and/or how to teach especially foreign languages to young learners. On the other hand, subject teachers in foreign languages have proficiency in foreign languages but not necessarily adequate education or experience in teaching young learners, i.e., younger than teenagers. The Universities training subject teachers in foreign languages have the freedom to offer various minor studies to be included in the degree of subject teacher and/or primary school teacher for students who are interested in early language education. These minor studies would offer knowledge and skills needed in the working life for teaching languages at the

primary school level, for example, language proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, teaching skills, and multicultural competencies. Such study programmes provide a good basis for early language teaching and learning, e.g. JULIET studies (25 +10 ECTS) in the University of Jyväskylä, Teaching Foreign Languages to Young Learners, TeFoLa, studies (25 ECTS) in the University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu (JULIET, 2015; TeFoLa, 2015).

Cooperation concerning in-service training for language teachers is customarily established by the initiative of the Finnish National Board of Education, national teacher associations or, most recently, by international endeavours (projects and networks supported by the Council of Europe) or by nationally based research and development initiatives mentored by university staff. In-service training events arranged by the National Board of Education focus on current challenges of teachers' daily work and are well attended especially at the onset of curricular reforms. Teacher associations arrange trips, seminars and summer courses for their members on diverse themes on demand (see e.g. SUKOL, 2015). The role of European language policies and related networks has gained in importance since the Finnish membership in the EU starting from 1995. Some language teachers have attended the European Center for Modern Languages (ECML) project dissemination seminars in Graz, Austria, and thereby acquired personal and professional links with their European colleagues. An ever-growing number of teachers and their pupils have made exchange visits to other European countries supported by programmes such as Erasmus or Nordplus, and increasingly, also beyond Europe.

In-service Support for Language Teachers

As mentioned above, language teachers in the Finnish basic education have wide academic freedom. Considering the high quality objectives of the national core curriculum, especially the latest one (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014), it is easy to understand the teachers' need for cooperation networks to implement the curriculum in practice and to enable their own professional development and lifelong learning. Networking in different directions and with many kinds of stakeholders should be encouraged and supported (Luukka et al., 2008: 153). A more open way of thinking can be nurtured by active, research-based networks for developing language education as cooperation between researchers, teacher educators, teachers and teacher students at the national as well as international level. A few examples of foreign language teachers' opportunities for networking and professional cooperation are described in the following.

REFORMING THE CURRICULUM

Networking activities of language teachers have been actively encouraged, offered and/or even funded nationally and locally, especially by the Finnish National Board of Education. During the curriculum reform process (Halinen, 2015), the Board

of Education invited teachers, teacher educators and researchers to cooperate in groups to draft and develop the national core curriculum. In addition, during the reform process the Board of Education initiated creating pedagogical materials for teachers and teacher teams to support implementing the curriculum in practice (e.g. Finnish Education Evaluation Centre & Finnish National Board of Education, 2015; Hildén & Härmälä, 2015; Mustaparta, 2015). The pedagogical implementation guide edited by Hildén and Härmälä (2015) is based on and inspired by the findings of the evaluation of learning outcomes in foreign languages at the end of basic education and it offers language teachers, e.g., practical options and suggestions regarding the use of ICT, ELP, and multimodal learning and authentic encounters. The writers are well-established researchers and teachers of different languages with extensive experience in teacher training and mentoring.

Developers Networking

In 2009–2011, the National Board of Education funded developing foreign language education in basic education in the frame of a project called KIELITIVOLI (in English: Amusement park of languages) (Tuokko, Takala, & Koikkalainen, 2011). The target group for the project was versatile, including different stakeholders in the field of language teaching in comprehensive schools: educational providers, headmasters, language teachers, comprehensive school pupils and their parents. The project had two main aims: firstly, to diversify the selection of languages offered and studied in comprehensive schools and secondly, to develop the quality of language teaching. The project included, for example, tailor-made in-service training for participating teachers (e.g. use of modern ICT and social media in language teaching), support and opportunities for networking between teachers, adding authentic connection to foreign languages and cultures.

For the purposes of Kielitivoli project, the National Board of Education created a website Kieltenopet verkossa (in English: Language teachers in the net) in 2009. Kieltenopet verkossa has become an open national network for language teachers and other developers of foreign language teaching. The network is maintained by an expert team in language education of the Board of Education. Anybody who wants to join the community is welcome to register as a member to network with other developers and share ideas in different theme groups and forums or in a personal blog (see Kieltenopet verkossa, 2015).

Combining Theory and Practice

Since the millennium, cooperation between the national teacher education units in the seven universities has expanded and intensified, e.g., in the form of research-based projects. This cooperation materialized as a series of ViKiPeda conferences (Conference in Foreign Language Pedagogy) launched in 1999. ViKiPeda was a national conference organized every two years, by rotation, by one of the seven

universities offering subject teacher education in foreign languages (in Helsinki, Joensuu Jyväskylä, Oulu, Tampere, Turku, and Vaasa). It offered a forum for sharing the latest research findings concerning language teaching and learning in different contexts of lifelong language learning. A major aim has been to invite not only teacher educators and researchers but also foreign language teachers in the field to participate and familiarise themselves with the current research results for the benefit of developing language teaching in practice and also to present their own experiments and experiences.

One of the central aims of ViKiPeda conferences from the very beginning was national, and increasingly, international networking. The conference always boasted foreign guest speakers, and the articles in the conference proceedings were increasingly written in either English or German instead of Finnish (conference proceedings published so far: Kaikkonen & Kohonen, 2000; Kohonen & Kaikkonen, 2002; Mäkinen, Kaikkonen, & Kohonen, 2004; Koskensalo, Smeds, Kaikkonen, & Kohonen, 2007; Tella, 2008; Kantelinen & Pollari, 2009; Bendtsen, Björklund, Forsman, & Sjöholm, 2012). The second round of ViKiPeda conferences was started in the University of Jyväskylä in the spring of 2013 and in the spirit of an international paradigm shift, the conference was renamed as KieliPeda (Conference in Language Education).

National Teacher Association

The Federation of Foreign Language Teachers in Finland, SUKOL, is a national organization of associations of foreign language teachers, founded in 1957. SUKOL has nowadays 29 local and 8 national member associations. These in turn have a total of approximately 5000 members. It is a pedagogic organization, which aims to promote the instruction and study of foreign languages in Finland. SUKOL gives grants for teachers to participate in seminars and courses in order to support foreign language teachers' professional development. Also, it supports FL teachers' everyday work by producing and selling teaching materials and language tests (SUKOL, 2015). SUKOL publishes a professional magazine *Tempus*, issued 6 times annually and disseminating the latest research findings in language teaching and learning as popularized articles. In addition, *Tempus* invites foreign language teachers to write and share their tips for good practices of teaching and learning. SUKOL aims to connect language teachers but it wants to network as an association itself as well: it is a member of FIPLV, Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes, which in turn is a B-status member of UNESCO. Quite naturally, SUKOL has close relations with its Nordic counterparts, too (see SUKOL, 2015).

FUTURE CHALLENGES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Determined effort has been put into developing language teaching and learning in basic education in Finland and the progress gained deserves to be maintained.

Simultaneously, there are admittedly a number of challenges that need to be addressed. A persistent problem, pointed out frequently over the years, hampering Finnish language education is the lack of overall planning at the national level (e.g., Pyykkö, 2009). Another considerable challenge is the fact that the curricula of different education levels and different languages do not form a functional continuum (Pyykkö, 2009, p. 49). Thirdly, and partly following from the challenges mentioned, the diversity of language studies offered and studied is too narrow, having too heavy a concentration on English, in spite of the clear need of, e.g. Swedish, Russian, German, Spanish and Chinese. Along with this pursuit, the mastery of national languages should be ensured in an officially bilingual country. An early start would be beneficial especially to those languages that pupils are not exposed to in their daily lives through the media (e.g., Mård-Miettinen & Björklund, 2007; Sajavaara, Luukka, & Pöyhönen, 2007).

Diversity of language studies should also be acknowledged and supported by means of extensive curricular planning to avoid unnecessary overlaps and gaps in content and scheduling. Not all content areas need to be studied in all languages. School curricula should acknowledge the principles of plurilingualism/multilingualism and allow for more diverse profiles of language skills as goals of study. For example, instead of more or less even target profiles across syllabi, predominantly receptive skills might suffice in some languages, while productive proficiency might be strived for in others. The role of communicative oral language use in a school context could easily be enhanced by increasing tasks that enable cultural encounters and accordingly add to the authenticity of school studies.

One of the greatest current challenges is caused by the dire economic situation. Basic education is free of charge for school-aged pupils (aged 7–16). Responsibility for educational funding is divided between state and municipalities/local authorities. Still, the funding channelled to the municipalities for basic education is not earmarked, which means that it is up to the local authorities to decide how to fund basic education. This apparently causes (and has already caused?) inequality between municipalities and schools regarding, e.g., the selection of both compulsory and optional language studies offered. Alarmingly, in Finland where equal opportunities of societal progress have traditionally been highly valued, research findings point towards increased differences in learning outcomes among schools and regions (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre & Finnish National Board of Education, 2015; Hautamäki et al., 2000; Tuokko, 2007).

The latest national evaluation of proficiency in foreign languages and in the second domestic language, Swedish, carried out in 2013, resulted in a set of recommendations for all assessed languages. These address in the first place the principles of autonomy, authenticity and modern affordances. Pupils should be given more opportunities to plan and assess their own work, and the use of ICT, as well as authentic materials and contacts with schools abroad, should be increased. Furthermore, homework contents and practice exercises should be modernised.

Moreover, to foster equality, the link between various sets of objectives and school grades should be clarified, and finally, assessment of communicative ability should be based equally on oral and written modes of language use (Finnish Evaluation Centre & Finnish National Board of Education, 2015; Härmälä, Huhtanen, & Puukko, 2014; Hildén & Rautopuro, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Meaningful and systematic use of the European language portfolio, ELP, in basic education could be one concrete means of responding to many of the current challenges in language education, e.g., challenges in regard to pupil autonomy / self-directedness, development of multilingualism and multiculturalism, as well as overall identity development. Implementation of the ELP requires new thinking, and a certain amount of in-service training/activities of professional support should accompany true commitment to this mode of work.

Another recognisable challenge acknowledges language teachers' often self-professed striving to teach extensive content. While the core curriculum allows individual teachers extensive freedom over their teaching content and methods, they often tend to strive for such ambitious course content that not only their own but also students' workload may grow heavy. A challenge for teachers seems to be interpreting the framework of the core curriculum with the relative freedom it offers. The curriculum reforms every ten years or so challenge teachers to analyse and revise their professional practices and engage in a sometimes cumbersome transformation process. Nevertheless, as academic professionals, Finnish teachers are more than capable of tackling this transformation process and renewing their professionalism.

In conclusion, language studies are a valuable and essential part of the Finnish basic education. It is of paramount importance to keep in mind that languages in today's world are not studied as separate entities of information. Modern language education is intertwined in all subject contents and supports the acquirement and development of knowledge and skills for lifelong learning and overall human growth. Moreover, learning languages enhances skills for learning in general, thus providing tools for personal growth and an asset for further knowledge building. Modern language proficiency entails functional, transversal skills self-evidently needed in intercultural encounters. The ongoing paradigm shift towards language education emphasises the commonly agreed-upon European objectives of multilingualism and multiculturalism (and plurilingualism and pluriculturalism). Today's language education also recognises and acknowledges the expanding diversity in language teaching and learning methods, contents, contexts and practises such as imaginatively combining in and out of school activities in foreign language learning and teaching. In Finland, this shift has been embraced in the latest National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014), paving the way for a welcome transformation toward a transversal intercultural language education.

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